

# Support Struggling Students with Academic Rigor

*A Conversation with Author and Educator Robyn Jackson*

For two decades, schools have been focusing on increasing academic rigor. More students than ever are taking advanced placement classes, adhering to college prep curricula, enrolling in math and science classes, and aspiring to attend university. Moreover, students, their teachers, and school leaders at all levels are having their collective feet held to the fire of high-stakes accountability testing.

For the foreseeable future, the academic bar will only be raised higher. The implementation of Common Core State Standards in English language arts and math—which will determine assessments in these subjects as early as 2012–13 in New York, for example—is compelling educators to figure out how to help many students still struggling to meet expectations of academic rigor that are intended to propel them to college or career success.

Robyn Jackson is the coauthor, with Claire Lambert, of the ASCD book *How to Support Struggling Students*. She also developed the teaching handbooks *How to Motivate Reluctant Learners* and *How to Plan Rigorous Instruction*, which give practical guidance and detailed tips for putting into practice the major ideas in her bestselling book *Never Work Harder Than Your Students & Other Principles of Great Teaching*.

A former high school teacher and middle school administrator, Jackson, who now conducts schoolwide professional development as a private consultant, helps teachers achieve mastery in using effective ways to help struggling students develop skills and habits that facilitate their learning and reduce their frustration in an age of increasing curricular rigor.

## What Is Academic Rigor?

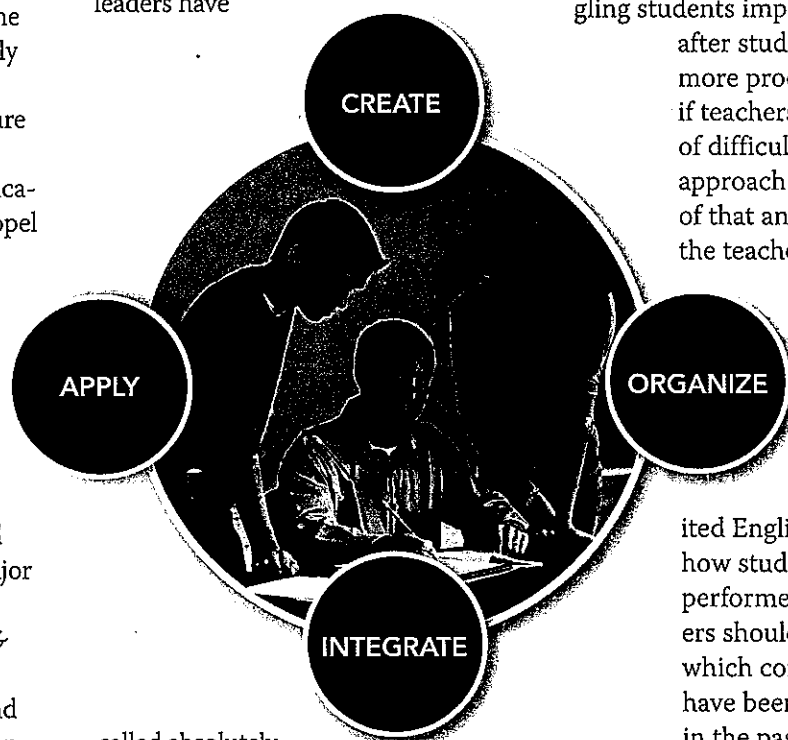
“Basically, academic rigor is helping kids learn to think for themselves,” says Jackson. She says that academic rigor has four main components: students know how to create their own meaning out of what they learn, they organize information so they create mental models, they integrate individual skills into whole sets of processes, and they apply what they’ve learned to new or novel situations.

It’s the kind of intellectual discipline that educational, industrial, and political leaders have

language learners; others may have cognitive, social, or emotional disabilities that inhibit learning; others may come from families where parents have little time or desire to monitor their children’s learning. When classroom teachers know each of their students and can analyze relevant data, they’ll be better able to meet the various needs of struggling students, points out Jackson.

## Anticipate Difficulty

Traditional remediation for struggling students imposes interventions after students have failed. It’s more productive, however, if teachers anticipate areas of difficulty before students approach new material. Part of that anticipation includes the teacher considering the classroom population by knowing which students have identified learning disabilities, which have limited English proficiency, or how students have previously performed in class. Teachers should also be aware of which concepts and ideas have been difficult for classes in the past, where student misperceptions or confusions have been particularly strong.



called absolutely necessary if the United States is to compete economically with the rest of the world, where a number of countries have surpassed U.S. education standards.

But students may struggle academically for a variety of reasons. Some students may be English

## Use Graphic Organizers

Struggling students often need help organizing information in a coherent fashion to show how different parts relate to the whole and other kinds of relationships and connections. Graphic organizers can help, provided that teachers don't use them like worksheets, cautions Jackson. "The point of the graphic organizer is to show kids how the facts are connected so they can organize them in their heads," she says. Organizing information into a mental model or framework is the first stage of rigorous learning, "and if you don't get that part right, it's harder to go farther in rigor," she emphasizes. "Ultimately, the goal is to get kids spontaneously creating their own graphic organizers—not on paper, but in their heads."

A graphic organizer used in advance of a lesson gives students a heads up about key vocabulary, concepts, and skills, that they will encounter in a unit, showing the relationships of the upcoming information but also clarifying expectations of student learning. At the same time, such organizational tools can help teachers clarify in their own mind what kind of work they'll need to do to activate student's prior knowledge in a given area and fill gaps for some students, to better level the playing field as a new unit is undertaken.

## Look for Clues

During a lesson, teachers are constantly collecting information about students' learning through observations and other formative assessments, assignments, quizzes, tests, class participation, and behavioral cues. One of the big differences between a neophyte or struggling teacher and a master teacher is that the latter knows what to pay attention to, says Jackson. "The feedback you collect all along from students gives you a lot of information about where kids are and where they're struggling," but a lot of teachers make the mistake of seeing every struggling student as needing intervention without making the distinction between a productive struggle and destructive struggle, she explains.

In their book *How to Support Struggling Students*, Jackson and Lambert identify clues that mark the distinction between the destructive and productive struggles in learning:

### A destructive struggle

- Leads to frustration.
- Makes learning goals feel hazy and out of reach.
- Feels fruitless.
- Leaves students feeling abandoned and on their own.
- Creates a sense of inadequacy.

### A productive struggle

- Leads to understanding.
- Makes learning goals feel attainable and effort seem worthwhile.
- Yields results.
- Leads students to feelings of empowerment and efficacy.
- Creates a sense of hope.

A destructive struggle needs immediate intervention, which requires that that teachers have a plan to address it. Plus, teachers have to understand why the student is struggling with completing a task or understanding a concept. For example, to understand Newton's Laws of Motion, a student with poor reading or note-taking skills may have difficulty making sense of information from a textbook. Another student, on the other hand, may have difficulty grasping abstract concepts like force, mass, weight, and acceleration, which would require a different intervention. A third student might fall behind in the same unit simply because he lacks time-management skills.

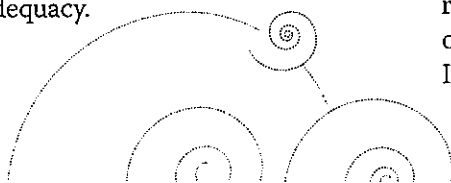
"In a destructive struggle, kids have run out of strategies; they give up; they put their heads down; they get frustrated or angry," Jackson explains. Sometimes, such students have relied too much on the teacher's help, so when the teacher is not around, they don't know what to do, Jackson says.

In a productive struggle, on the other hand, students grapple with the issues and are able to come up with a solution themselves, developing persistence and resilience in pursuing and attaining the learning goal or understanding, says Jackson. In productive struggles, kids have developed the necessary strategies for working through something difficult. They can also take a teacher's suggestions for help and run with them.

Jackson and Lambert recommend that for each lesson or unit, teachers develop a red flag that would show when students were falling short of mastering the unit's material. This could be thresholds on test and quiz scores, homework assignments, and other formative measures. Appearance of a specific red flag would then prompt the teacher to make an appropriate intervention.

The teacher should target the interventions to the need of the particular student and the appropriate degree of support, instead of looking for "big symptoms with big solutions," the authors say. Solutions could range from offering feedback, suggesting memory strategies, or making an abstract concept more concrete (e.g., a demonstration of Newton's Laws of Motion with balls or other objects) to summarizing strategies or providing peer tutoring.

It's also important that a teacher's intervention and remediation have a specific end point. "One of the key signs of rigor is independent thinking and learning," says Jackson. If the struggling student doesn't really learn how to work



independently by internalizing strategies for organizing ideas, summarizing information, or recalling key concepts through a mnemonic, it creates a kind of "learned helplessness" for the student that becomes more work for the teacher, Jackson says.

With the coming of the Common Core State Standards, Jackson believes that the demand for academic rigor will be even stronger. "We're grossly unprepared for putting Common Core standards into place. Common Core standards will demand more rigor, but teachers are not really equipped to create the kind of rigorous learning environment that's needed," says Jackson. She worries

that if teachers haven't been well prepared, the Common Core Standards won't be implemented with fidelity. "People will cover the content, but not the level of thinking that is demanded for that content," Jackson warns. "Unfortunately, kids will be getting the same learning experience as they were getting in the past."

But the hope is this, Jackson is also quick to point out: "Rigor requires rigor—if we want to develop rigorous learning and thinking for our kids, then we have to be more rigorous in our teaching. It depends on the way we do professional development and how we train teachers, but rigor can become more natural in the classroom."

—RICK ALLEN



## Proposed Changes to the ASCD Constitution Approved

In May, ASCD members voted to approve a set of proposed changes to ASCD's Constitution; the results were certified on June 7, 2012, by the independent audit firm of CliftonLarsonAllen. To learn more about the approved changes, go to [www.ascd.org/governance](http://www.ascd.org/governance).

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Nancy Gibson, Ill.

### Board of Directors (one position; two-year term):

D. William Dodds, Ill.

Judith Zimmerman, Ohio

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Jennifer Lewis, Australia

Matt McClure, Ark.

Pam Vogel, Iowa

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